WISCONSIN WORKSHOP FOR THE BLIND

HELPS HANDICAPPED.

HV1795
.W57
1938

HV1795
W

M.C. MIGEL LIBRARY
AMERICAN PRINTING
HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

Wisconsin State Employee v. VII No. 1 Jan 1938.

Wisconsin Workshop For the Blind Helps Handicapped

Composite Article Written by the
Administrative Staff of
the Workshop

HV1775
W
cop. 1

History

The Wisconsin Workshop for the Blind was established by the legislature in 1903 for the purpose of giving the blind men of the state of Wisconsin a chance to earn a living. Mr. Oscar Kustermann was the first superintendent serving the institution until 1925 when he was succeeded by Mr. J. T. Hooper until 1933. From that time on, it has been directly under the State Board of Control with Mr. E. F. Costigan as supervisor. The workshop was moved three times due to its growth and other reasons. Since 1927 it has occupied its present quarters at 125 North Water Street —a 5-story and basement building with a floor space of 18,000 square feet—which are now entirely inadequate to accommodate all of our activities. The Wisconsin Workshop for the Blind is the only institution under the Board of Control which does not have its own building, but has been housed in rented quarters for 35 years.

During the early years of the institution, the only products manufactured were willowware and basketry. The average number of blind men employed was about 30. As time went on, the competition with baskets imported from Central Europe became so keen that it was found necessary to diversify our industries, although clothes baskets and hampers are still manufactured, but in more limited numbers.

With our expansion came the manufacture of cocoa mats and brushes. In adding these departments, we had to consider what items the public would buy in the largest amounts, as well as what could be manufactured successfully by blind men.

During the 1935 legislature, a bill was presented to consolidate the Workshop for the Blind with the commercial activities of the Field Agency which was handling the homeworker's products at Janesville. This bill became a law in August, 1935, and the consolidation was effected as of September 1 of that year, combining the commercial activities of the Workshop and the home work. The sale of home work products is now a large factor in our annual sales total.

Covering a period of eight years, the number of blind men employed, the sales, purchases, and wages paid to blind men have increased over 200 per cent. Originally, we sold principally in the middle western states, but today we also have choice accounts in Florida, Washington, California, and Texas.

Purpose

Any blind male resident of the state is privileged to apply for employment at the Workshop for the Blind. A doctor's report showing the amount of vision is all that is required of the applicant. Men come to Milwaukee from all parts of the state to work at the Shop. They are usually trained on the job. We keep a list of applicants and when a vacancy occurs, a man is chosen from the list who is best qualified for the particular job available. The men in the Workshop are paid piece rate for the most part, and the amount they may earn in a given time is in accordance with their ambition and ability. There are a few men doing servicing and other odd jobs who are paid a straight day rate. At the present time, there are about 80 blind men regularly employed at the Workshop besides about 55 home workers who receive work and are on the payroll regularly.

Many people who are not familiar with the blind are inclined to be over sympathetic when they meet a blind person or a group of blind people and think something should be done for them as a class, but they do not give sufficient thought to the matter to realize that this handicapped group is in a class, mentally and physically—except for sight—with the rest of us. Our blind people, on the whole, are an intelligent, industrious group who ask only for an opportunity to make an honest, respectable living. Many of them lost their sight through accident. Prior to such loss, they worked in competitive fields with other sighted people. The state is trying to prevent these people from being "shelved." Figuratively speaking, they are the same alert, energetic people they were before misfortune overtook them, and we, the public, should treat them as such. Our purpose is to furnish employment to occupy their minds and their hands, so they may make their own living and preserve their self-respect.

Mat Plant

In the past eight years, fast changing conditions have necessitated many changes in our plans of procedure. Fortunately, we have been under the supervision of an alert board that has always had a sympathetic understanding of our problems and did all in its power to help solve the new difficulties as they arose. Very often, complete changes have been the solution of our problems, to the point that we now do not hesitate to ask for them; for the more changes we have made, the more successful we have been. During the summer of 1932 when the nation's business was at its lowest ebb, the Workshop made its greatest change from the previously established lines of industry. It was at this time, when it was almost impossible to find a ray of hope or a word of encouragement anywhere, that it was decided upon to install the necessary equipment for the manufacture of cocoa door mats as an industry for our blind men. This industry was chosen because it was not competing with a single tax payer in the state of Wisconsin. This venture was something entirely new to the sheltered shops for the blind throughout the nation which are to this day still staying with the old crafts taught to the blind 50 years ago.

We are proud to have had a part in bringing credit to Wisconsin for having set up the first blind industry that took our men off the old style handicraft bench, giving them a place of importance in a modern production line as industry knows it today. The establishment of this new undertaking was not without its hardships, but that this has been accomplished and is functioning successfully is not questioned today.

While we are an institution first, last, and all the time, nevertheless our success is in a large degree measured from the standpoint of commerce and industry; because the more successful we are along these lines, the more good we can accomplish as the institution for which we were founded. In reality, our institution is one of social service, and it is our belief that the best form of social security is a full day's work every working day. We feel we are carrying out the purpose of our institution when we re-establish a handicapped man in some line of work in which he can gain a livelihood, after he has been rejected by industry because of his handicap and present legislation which makes him a hazardous risk.

In our cocoa mat plant alone, we now employ 60 men the year around. In the manufacturing of this one product, we are now using 12 carloads of Coir yarn a year. This raw material comes to us direct from India. We have to figure on 120 days for delivery; so we usually have from three to four carloads en route to us at all times.

We are proud, indeed, of our acquaintance with our competitors and the friendly recognition that is accorded us by them in the industry. They consider us one of the nation's largest producers, and welcome us in trade channels and conferences. Our plant, as a whole, is very complete and differs from other manufacturers in one way only—they use power looms where we use hand looms. The use of power looms would defeat our purpose.

Home Work

Any blind person, man or woman, may apply for home work. In giving employment to home workers, we consider not only the person's skill and training but also his or her need of the work. We try not to spread the work among so many workers that individuals are unable to develop speed and skill or to make any money. The blind home workers are paid a piece rate after tests have been given to see what an average worker can do in a given period of time. These piece rates compare favorably with wages in private factories and are higher than those paid in most states for home work.

From the very beginning of our work with the blind, it has been our policy insofar as possible to ignore blindness when it comes to production of articles for sale. We insist with

ourselves and with the blind that blindness is no excuse for poor workmanship. We treat the blind in their work as producers just as any ordinary citizen would treat the producer of an article that he buys in the general market—in the store. He doesn't ask what the antecedents of the person are that made this shirt. We insist upon getting an article that is well made and worth the money, and we are absolutely indifferent as to the background or difficulties under which the workman produces the article, so our attitude towards the blind is the same—forget that he is blind, only that he is a producer and demand good workmanship. There has been too much of GIVE, GIVE TO THE BLIND, PITY THE BLIND, HAND IT OUT TO THE BLIND. We insist that much must be demanded of the blind. When articles come to us faulty in workmanship, we "throw" them back at the producer, forcing him to pay transportation not only on the article as it was sent to us, but its return cost of transportation, too.

We all can easily slip into self-pity for one reason or another, and we can readily slip into a position of pity and the finding of alibis for a handicapped person. To allow oneself to so slip is to disqualify ourselves as workers for and with handicapped people. The remarkable thing to us is the way the blind have responded to and accepted this type of treatment with a "thank you" attitude. The workers understand that we must have this high standard of workmanship as we stand back of every article we sell.

We are constantly on the lookout for the new items which can be manufactured either in the Workshop or by blind workers in their own homes and that can be sold in large quantities to the public. Besides the original home work items of brooms, rugs, mops, ironing board and mangle covers and pads, linen towels, aprons, hearth brooms, the blind home workers are now making several kinds of braided leather belts, including motorcycle belts, in large quantities. Braided suspenders and Turkish towels have also been added recently.

The raw materials are sent out to the home workers from the Workshop, made up by them and returned to us. Orders and materials are sent out as there are calls for the articles from the sales department, although a stock of everything is kept on hand. The home workers are paid when their work is turned in and accepted. Materials are also sent out to workers who order them to make articles which they can sell independently of the sales organization or Workshop. Many of the home workers are located outside of Milwaukee and depend upon parcel post or other means of transportation for sending work to and from the Workshop. We try to send out large enough orders so that the cost of transportation will not eat up too much of the profits. Most of our items are labeled with the Wisconsin Blind Products seal wherever convenient.

Summer School

The summer school at Janesville trains adult blind workers in the various trades, such as rug weaving, leather work, machine sewing, and cooperates with us in helping to give employment to qualified and trained blind workers. The home teachers also assist in this work, helping to bring the services of our organization to the attention of blind persons throughout the state and giving additional training in the various trades.

Unfortunately, many blind persons lose both their sight and their money at the same time, as when a person's sight begins to fail, he is willing to spend all the money he has in an effort to save it, sometimes successfully but more often to no avail. Wherever possible, an effort is made to place a blind person in private employment where he can use knowledge previously obtained from education and experience but, since the depression, this has been more and more difficult. Although the work of the Workshop and the home work are in a way a last resort, they do furnish regular employment to a great number of blind persons who would not be otherwise employed, and this is done without the stigma of public charity. The employment of both home workers and shop workers is under the direction of Miss Mary E. Hulburt, employment secretary.

Other Industries

As stated above, our cocoa mat plant is our main industry. Our brush department is now second in rank. In this department, we make a full line of floor brushes in all the popular constructions and sizes with the exception of bristle brushes which have proven too technical. Blind men cannot work with these because the material is too expensive.

The above two industries have helped materially in reducing our basket production which has always been operated at a loss; however, we are now employing 15 men in the basket department without a serious drain on our revolving fund.

At the present time, we are starting the manufacture of rubber door mats. These are to be sold with our cocoa fiber mats. We are in hopes that this will enable us to further reduce our willow basket production.

We operate our industries with a revolving fund. The money received from the sale of goods is deposited in this fund to pay for the raw materials necessary and to meet the weekly payroll. Fate has been kind to us the past five years, and we have been able to keep this fund intact; besides, we have been able to do more in the pay check of the individual.

All of our industries are operated wholly for the good of our employees. We get considerable satisfaction out of operating on the profit sharing basis. When our funds will permit, bonuses are paid to the men. We are pleased to state that a Christmas bonus was paid this year, sufficient to bring a good dinner and Christmas cheer to every blind employee's family.

Sales

Before 1927, the goods manufactured by our Workshop and the home workers were sold either through stores and private sales or through the aid of women's clubs, church bazaars, and other organizations. The volume of goods sold was small, and the sales appeal was principally a charitable one. Since the summer school for adult blind at Janesville was annually turning out competent workmen who were looking to us for assistance in marketing their goods, we were prompted to look for another outlet for their products. After some study and experiment, sighted salesmen were hired and put to work soliciting orders direct from the industrial trade and door-to-door sales. In a few months, orders began coming in in such a volume that our small office force was entirely inadequate to handle all the detail involved. To continue to make an effort to increase the sales which were desired would also increase the detail with which we were not able to cope. We had to admit against our wishes that we must accept the alternative of disconnecting the sales organization and permitting it to grow as a self-sustaining unit because our sales department had grown as large as we could handle. This course was chosen in June 1927 in the interest of the blind workers; then the Wisconsin Blind Products was organized and set up as our recognized distributor. Today, about 50 per cent of the goods are marketed through this organization.

In 1930, this sales organization branched out to Michigan with a similar arrangement under an agreement whereby Wisconsin goods could be sold in the Detroit office, and Michigan goods sold in the Milwaukee office, where the products of the two states did not conflict. Similar agreements were later made with Missouri and Iowa. This cooperative plan with the neighboring states is now working

---

"Who's Who" in the Pictures

- *(1) The mat plant at the Workshop for the Blind. This is the shop's largest industry.*
- *(2) Basket weaving, once the major industry for persons handicapped by blindness, is now one of the minor industries at the shop.*
- *(3) The brush factory, in which floor sweepers, wall cleaners, scrub brushes, and the like are expertly manufactured.*
- *(4) E. F. Costigan, assistant superintendent and supervisor of the Workshop.*
- *(5) Not all of the people employed at the Wisconsin Workshop for the blind are sightless. Sixteen state employees, who enjoy normal sight, administer the affairs of the various departments of the institution. All sixteen employees are members in good standing of the Wisconsin State Employees Association. Last, but not least, they have their dues paid up to date. First row, left to right: Esther A. Weber, Mrs. Hedwig Robinson, Mary E. Hulburt, Roma E. Lalk. Second row: William F. Krutz, Peter J. Grünzweig, Carl H. Reuter, E. F. Costigan, Richard P. Driscoll, Chester S. Gerlach. Third row: Frank Wunderer, Thomas M. Gozdzialski, Joseph F. Ptacek, Jr., Joseph F. Ptacek, Joseph Siehr, Arthur L. Jensen.*

out very successfully and to the benefit of all concerned.

Besides the market afforded us through this sales organization, we are proud of the representation we have as an outlet through dealers and large jobbing concerns that feature and catalog our merchandise. We are again proud of our part in bringing recognition to Wisconsin by being out in the lead when it comes to placing blind-made goods in the hands of the consuming public.

Conclusion

A survey of Wisconsin shows that there are about 3800 visually handicapped people in the state. Of this number only about 10 per cent are under twenty years of age and about 65 per cent are over fifty years of age. Although comparatively few of this number are employable, many of those who are become excellent workmen. One of the chief handicaps of the blind is the lack of confidence which the sighted people have in their ability to do things. Most of the blind men who work at the shop come to work every morning and return home unassisted. A number of them live at the Badger Home for the Blind, but the majority board and room in different parts of the city with sighted persons.

All of our employees are not totally blind, but have varying degrees of vision ranging from the ability to distinguish only light from darkness to reading of print at very close range. Many of these people are what is known as "industrially blind." They are not blind in the popular sense of being completely without sight, but their vision is too poor to enable them to hold a job in private industry.

You see many blind people carrying red and white canes which are furnished free of charge to all blind persons who desire them by all the Lions Clubs in the state. These canes are a great aid to the blind especially in preventing automobile accidents because motorists quickly recognize the canes and make allowances, for without the canes the blind man may not be recognized as such. Work with the blind is a major activity with all the Lions Clubs throughout the country, and we are fortunate in having 85 of these clubs in the state of Wisconsin. Besides furnishing the canes, these clubs provide funds of money to be loaned to blind workers for the purchase of equipment such as sewing machines, stand equipment and other expenditures which might aid them in making a living. "Help the Blind to Help Themselves" is the motto of the sales organization, and it is one which the blind themselves approve. This slogan represents exactly what we, in the work, are attempting to do.

Notice

Members who do not receive copies of the magazine regularly will please notify the Association office. Correct addresses for all members outside of Madison will assist us in getting your magazine to you on time.